

Pre-school software

Most children can use a PC before they can read and write now, but how good are the programs and websites aimed at younger kids? Lynley Dram enlists the help of a few toddlers to find out

4MATION

Patch the Puppy

★★★★

£46 inc VAT

We had high expectations of Patch the Puppy, coming as it does from the same UK software publishers that developed the excellent Guardians of the Greenwood. Like Guardians, Patch has a distinctly English feel, from the narration to the softer drawing of the animations. Designed for ages three to six, this title aims to develop skills in the core subjects of maths, language and science. Where appropriate it works towards a National Curriculum statement at Level One.

There were no installation problems with Patch the Puppy as it works straight off the CD. However, it won't work on Mac OS X, only on OS 9.

That this might be a title aimed more at educational establishments, rather than at parents hoping to engage their children, is obvious from the packaging. This has a simple illustration and information for adults on the front, and some tiny screenshots from the games on the back. And that's not the only area where parents had difficulty getting the children interested. There is no payoff for the little nippers when they get an answer right, simply the narrator saying that yes, that was correct, in the same tone of voice used throughout the CD.

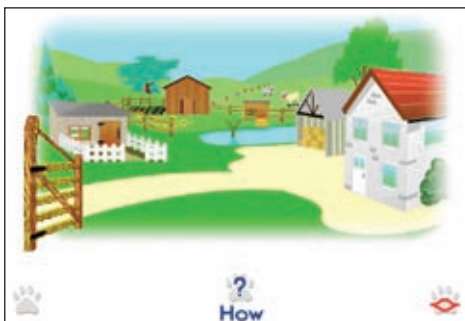
Children access puzzles and games by clicking on items onscreen. However, the cursor doesn't change shape when it's over a clickable item, and our testers became frustrated trying to find an item that worked.

As an educational tool, Patch does the job. However, it makes no effort to entertain or engage the child's attention.

SUMMARY

- ✓ A solid educational tool
- ✗ No rewards for right answer
- ✗ Expensive

PRE-SCHOOL SOFTWARE Requires Windows 95 or above, Mac OS 9, 16MB RAM
SUPPLIER 4Mation 01271 322974
DETAILS www.4mation.co.uk



▲ Help your toddler to learn by playing games and completing puzzles with Patch the Puppy

GSP

Balamory

★★★★★

£8.21 inc VAT

Balamory has the advantage of familiarity, being based on a TV show that is quite popular with the pre-school age group. This is also a disadvantage: real people don't look the same when rendered in computer graphics, and our three-year-old tester noted that Josie Jump didn't look like the TV character.

The CD-ROM centres around the village of Balamory. The child accesses the program's features by clicking on a building. There are five interactive games, video clips and village stories. It also has pictures to colour that the kids can print out.

Balamory aims to teach children letter and character recognition, spelling and matching numbers and objects. Tasks also help a child with computer skills such as getting used to the relationship between moving a mouse on the table and the movement of the cursor onscreen. This is helpful for younger children – the title is for children aged 3 plus. However, with slightly older pre-schoolers who can already use a computer, it's unnecessary.

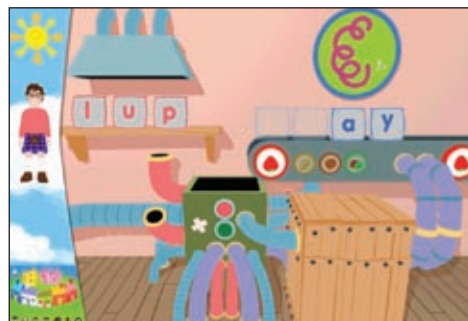
Graphics are colourful, and there's a lot of praise for the child when they win a game or find a right answer. However, it failed to hold the attention of our young testers for longer than 10 minutes at a time.

Balamory is a lovely TV show, and the CD-ROM reflects this. For children who love the show it will be a must-buy. But unfortunately, it doesn't have enough for kids to do, and in the end our young testers were quickly asking for the CBeebies website.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Familiarity for children
- ✓ Bright and colourful graphics
- ✗ Didn't hold kids' attention

PRE-SCHOOL SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98, Me or XP, 400MHz Pentium II processor, 64MB RAM (128MB for Windows XP)
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.gsonline.co.uk



▲ Have fun with computer skills and find out what's going on in the story in Balamory

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Noddy – Let's Get Ready for School

★★★★★

£4.99 inc VAT

Noddy is a happy chap, with his jolly blue hat and its little bell. He has a great appeal to pre-schoolers, but would this transfer to a computer game? The software has a wide remit, with its aims of teaching youngsters everything from numbers and simple arithmetic to spelling and musical understanding.

It didn't get off to a promising start. Out of all the titles here it was the only one to give us serious problems when installing. We had compatibility problems with XP, and it would only work in 16-bit colour, which meant the display settings need to be changed. So, while the graphics are bright and clear and don't clutter up the screen, image quality is not the best.

However, if it hadn't been for these issues, this CD-ROM would have got a five-star rating. It was the only one of the four titles to hold the kids' attention for more than a few minutes. It kept our young tester occupied for 20 minutes – which is pretty good going for a four-year-old – and she



▲ Children responded well to Noddy and wanted to return to playing with the software

asked to use the program again a couple of days later, which was also unusual in this test. Our parents didn't find Noddy intuitive to use; children will need guidance, and some for the parents wouldn't go amiss at times either. It isn't always clear what the objective is; for example,

Noddy has to collect sixpences to play the games at the fair but that's not explained until he gets to the fairground, when he's told to go back to the other sections of the program.

However, Noddy has been skilfully put together, and does something that none of the other titles here managed to do: it kept our young testers from asking for the CBeebies site.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Wide appeal to youngsters
- ✓ Holds kids' attention
- ✗ Installation problems
- ✗ Not particularly intuitive

PRE-SCHOOL SOFTWARE Requires
Pentium 90 processor, 16MB RAM,
16-bit colour
SUPPLIER GSP Online 01480 496666
DETAILS www.gsonline.co.uk

Nick Jr

★★★★★

www.nickjr.co.uk

Nick Jr (junior) is a digital TV channel offshoot from Nickelodeon. As the name suggests, Nick Jr is aimed at younger children. It is host to lots of well-known children's programmes, including *Dora the Explorer*, *Thomas the Tank Engine* and *Angelina Ballerina*. The games on the site reflect these programmes.

We found the website quite slow in loading pages compared to CBeebies, even though we were using broadband. And the site's layout isn't as child-friendly.

However, there are plenty of games and activities, and these are related to the show on which they're based. So, for example, with *Angelina* you can choreograph her dancing.

Although it isn't as comprehensive as CBeebies, it does

have what most kids will want: familiar characters, engrossing games and lots of art activities that can be printed out and worked on away from the computer.



▲ All the popular Nick Jr characters are online

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent artwork project
- ✗ Layout isn't child friendly

FOCUS MULTIMEDIA

Jump Ahead Toddlers

★★★★★

£9.99 inc VAT

Jump Ahead Toddlers has the youngest age range here, aiming itself at tots from 18 months up to three years old. Its main focus is on building vocabulary and it has 200 early vocabulary words, as well as music. Toddlers can sing along to 14 songs, nine of which were written specifically for the program. There's also a musical instrument section, where children can learn about seven musical instruments, each of which plays three tunes.

A game in which the child feeds a dog by using the mouse to give it treats helps with key computer skills. However, our parents found the voices of some of the characters in the program quite annoying.

It wasn't particularly easy to set this game up. It asks for a lower colour setting than most modern computers will have, and even when we'd changed the display to 256 colour, Windows would sometimes automatically reset, causing the program to stop. Although our parents thought the software itself was quite good, it still failed to keep



▲ The image quality isn't the best, but Jump Ahead Toddlers helps kids to learn about music

our young testers' attention. Hearing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star on the program had one little girl insisting that she be allowed to go to CBeebies so that she could hear the same song

sung by the Fimbles. Because of the low colour setting, the image quality of Jump Ahead Toddlers isn't the best. However, that's not something that will bother most tots. Aside from the installation issues, the games themselves went down well with the parents, although the children were rather less impressed.

SUMMARY

- ✓ A good introduction to music
- ✗ Poor image quality
- ✗ Failed to keep kids' attention
- ✗ Not particularly intuitive

PRE-SCHOOL SOFTWARE Requires
Windows 95 or above, 256 colours,
8MB RAM, 15MB disk space
SUPPLIER Focus 01889 570156
DETAILS www.focusmm.co.uk

CBeebies

★★★★★

www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies

CBeebies is the name given to younger children's programming on the BBC. It is also the name of a dedicated kids' digital channel, which airs such pre-schoolers' favourites as *Teletubbies*, *The Tweenies* and *Bob The Builder*. Finally, it's a website consisting of games and activities based on those same TV shows. If you have a pre-schooler and you have broadband, you won't need anything else.

Games are regularly updated. There are also art activities, which can be printed, e-cards and a songs section that includes singalongs, a bedtime song and an animal ABC. There's even a grown-ups section for the parents.

All our young testers said the same thing when playing the other titles looked at here – can we play on CBeebies now?



▲ CBeebies is the best of the bunch for tots

SUMMARY

- ✓ Games based on popular characters
- ✓ Plenty of activities to keep kids occupied
- ✓ Games regularly updated
- ✗ You'll need broadband to make the most of it